

'Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God.' Acts 20.26-27.

St Paul knew that he would never see these Ephesians elders again. They were his friends; he had lived with them for over two years, but now he must go on to Jerusalem. In this, his last words to them, he wanted to put the record straight, vv33-34... But what pressed most on his mind was that they realised he had been a faithful preacher of Christ's gospel, v24... and here at v27... And what I want you to notice today is that little word 'whole': the 'whole counsel of God'.

This is something that I worry about also. When I preach, do I twist the Bible to make it back up the thoughts of Brian Hunt? Do I choose only those scripture passages which agree with Brian's pet-theories? One day, like all of you, I must appear before Almighty God, the Judge of all. Did I preach God's Word or Brian Hunt's Word? Did I mislead the people? If I did, I have blood on my hands. Like the prophet Ezekiel, I was called to be a watchman, to warn the people about God's judgement. Your eternal destination is at stake here, heaven or hell. You may not listen to the watchman - that's your business - but my job is to warn. But woe to me if I don't tell you what God clearly says in scripture: turn to p1161, 2 Cor 5.10 to see it clearly... That's why I preach through whole books of the Bible, like Acts. I can't then pick and choose the bits I like. Like Paul, I must preach 'all God's will', v26-27...

What did Paul mean by saying he didn't shrink from preaching 'the whole counsel of God'? He meant that he told them *everything* God has said in his Word. There's a certain

class of preacher who preaches God's *love*, but never mentions his *anger*. He tells the people about *heaven*, but never about hell; that God *loves* them, but not that they're sinners under judgement. He speaks a lot about Jesus as a wise teacher who identified with the poor and the outcast, but sees Jesus' miracles and rising from the dead as pre-science, and talk of his saving blood on the Cross as barbaric.

And I'm afraid that many congregations are simply not hearing today the 'whole counsel of God'. This is why congregations are dying. They're hearing the 'nice' bits, but they're not hearing the truth. And the truth is that God is a *holy* God who will never, never accept our sinfulness. The truth is that God is in fact so loving that he will not pass over as unimportant the hurts that people do to each other. He *will* judge us and hold us to account. If I thought that God would let evildoers away with it, I would not consider him worth worshipping. A loving God will stand up for the abused, the bullied and exploited. The reality of judgement and hell is part of God's love. And so the scripture teaches us.

Why is Paul so anxious that the Ephesian elders know he has preached 'the whole counsel of God' to them? Partly, as we saw, it is because he knows he must give an account of himself on the Day of Judgement; and partly because, once he has left them for good, they will be vulnerable, vv29-31... The 'savage wolves' of v29 are the Roman authorities, the Government, who will persecute them for being Christians. They need to be sure of themselves, to face that onslaught. A Jesus who wasn't really raised from the dead, (if the liberals and the old Bp of

Durham are right), isn't going to be much consolation to them, is he, when they are being thrown to the lions? In our own day, we Christians here in Britain are facing ever more pressure from the State. Have I given you the 'whole counsel of God' so that you are spiritually equipped to face up to it? Have I encouraged you to put your confidence in Jesus as Lord?

But if there is danger from outside, there is also, Paul realises, real danger from *inside* the church, v30... It's so easy to distort the gospel by taking scripture passages out of context. It's incredible to think that apartheid in S Africa was justified from scripture. Or take a verse we looked at recently, 'You are not your own'. You could take that out of context and say that 'You are the State's'. So we get totalitarianism from the Bible. Or what about the famous verse in Acts 4.32 where they had everything in common? Doesn't that lead us to Marxism, to communism? St Paul makes a lot of the concept of 'liberty' against 'law'. Doesn't that justify permissiveness? And all that talk about 'judging others lest ye be judged': isn't that telling us not to be judgemental?

You may remember a clergyman, Jeffrey John, who very nearly became the first openly gay bishop in the C of E. Apparently his favourite text is 2 Cor 3.17, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'. So there you have it! Let's be free. The Holy Spirit of God himself is letting him be free to be gay. Who are we to resist? I wonder if he also thinks the Holy Spirit lets someone be free to be a paedophile! If he had placed that verse in the context of the whole counsel of God, the whole Bible, the conclusion would be very different.

It is astonishing how the virus of *Marxism* has infiltrated the minds of modern churchgoers, often, as I say, from verses within the Bible itself. Liberation theology from Latin America is basically communism. Even here a lot of what passes for Christianity is basically do-goodery and progressive politics. Aren't we told to love our neighbour? the Good Samaritan and all that? Aren't we told to work for the kingdom of God? Yes, of course, but we forget that it is the kingdom, the sovereignty, of *God*, not the kingdom of *man*. *Revelation 21* tells us that it is *Christ* who will bring in the new heaven and the new earth, not us! We must await Christ's Second Coming.

All this distorting of Christ's Gospel can be avoided if we stop taking verses out of context and heed the 'whole counsel of God'. We need to read *all* the scriptures, not just the bits that appeal to us. That's how the devil works!

So, if we fail to tell people that we are sinners, we underestimate the human capacity for evil, with disastrous consequences. If we talk of love without God's *anger*, we sentimentalise God and leave the victims of evil with no final recourse or hope of justice. If we forget about *hell*, then evil has got away with it. If we see Christ's miracles as superstition, we make Jesus no different from any other man. He is not an Almighty God, and therefore no help to us. If there is no blood, no atoning sacrifice at Calvary's Cross, then the price for our guilt has not been paid. If Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, then there's no hope for us after death. God is *not* able. Eternity itself is at stake here, so it's vital that from our pulpits we hear the whole counsel of God.